

## The Implementation of Portfolio Assessment in an ESL/EFL Classroom

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### Introduction

How could my students be more autonomous and responsible in their learning? How could I motivate my students to learn? Is there a better way to evaluate my students' learning progress other than the traditional pencil-and-paper test? These were questions I posed to myself when I was an EFL teacher in Macau. Besides these questions, I also had some basic questions about classroom management, teaching tools, students' progress, and so on. After some careful observation and reflection, I realized that one of the biggest factors that triggered all of my questions was seeing students' lack of motivation to learn English. Teaching high school students in Macau for three years, I gradually came to realize the cause of my students' low level of motivation. I believe it might have come from the design of the evaluation procedures that did not truly reflect the students' capabilities in the application of the English language. Evaluation was mainly in the traditional approach, which is based on the philosophy that one test will fit all students despite individual differences. Furthermore, the administrators were highly concerned about the examination scores and used them to determine how diligent students were and how well teachers performed. Under these circumstances, teachers faced great pressure to boost the scores of students. Thus, teachers spent most of their time making exercises for students to practice for their tests rather than focusing on the effectiveness of the tests and the curriculum or the needs of the students. Yet, alternative assessment was hardly considered as an option.

Coming from this situation, I started to have interests in different kinds of assessment. Certainly, I did not know what alternative assessment was at that time. I only had the desire to go beyond pencil-and-paper tests when I assessed students'

performance. For example, in assessing students' writing skills and the effectiveness of my teaching methodologies, I would set up conferences with students to discuss their papers so they had the chance to clarify what they wanted to write. After that, they could go home and rewrite their papers. Thus, instead of just collecting the final product of the students' writing, I gave them a second chance to rewrite it. This method was not used by the other teachers, and I had a difficult time being persistent in implementing it in the curriculum, partly because of the large size of the classes.

While taking courses toward my master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language at Hawai'i Pacific University, I have begun to learn some of the differences between traditional and alternative assessment, particularly portfolio assessment. Essentially, traditional assessment involves the employment of paper-and-pencil, standardized tests to assess students' performance under time pressure. Portfolio assessment, on the other hand, can evaluate students holistically based on the content of the portfolio on which the teachers and students agree. Moreover, it focuses greatly on individual differences. As language cannot be acquired overnight, the portfolio can give students a chance to build up their experiences in language learning, and this experience can motivate students to be more involved in the classroom because they feel that they have control in their own learning rather than just having the teachers tell them what they have to learn. Perhaps the most useful aspect of portfolio assessment is that it is learner-centered. For example, as a newly trained teacher, I can bring my portfolio with me wherever I teach, and the portfolio can help me to further my interest in the field of ESL as well as remind me of what I have learned. With portfolio assessment, students can

have a sense of accomplishment after they compile their in-class or outside-class work.

However, at least in some EFL contexts such as Macau, instead of substituting the traditional assessment with portfolio assessment altogether, integrating it into the curriculum is a better choice at this point because this form of assessment is still finding its way into the mainstream of assessment due to limited information on validity and reliability. In order to implement portfolio assessment in an EFL or ESL classroom, we need to first understand the basic concepts of the use of the portfolio and the advantages and disadvantages of using portfolio assessment.

### **Definition and Purposes of The Portfolio**

In defining the word *portfolio*, people have different points of views. Some teachers consider the use of a portfolio as part of an alternative assessment which can contain either students' best work or their accomplishments (Nunes, 2004). According to Yang (2003), the portfolio is a compilation of students' work, which demonstrates how much effort they have put into their work, their progress and achievement in their learning, and their reflection on the materials chosen for the portfolio. The portfolio is beneficial not only to students but also to teachers. As Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) stated, the portfolio acts as a bridge between "instruction and assessment" (as cited in Yang, p. 294).

A portfolio is a useful bridge because teachers need to do more than just transmit knowledge to students (Yang, 2003). Teachers should show students how to acquire "knowledge, skills, and strategies" so that they can eventually turn into autonomous and responsible learners for their own learning (Yang, p. 293). Therefore, the purpose of portfolios in an ESL/EFL classroom is to increase the level of students' motivation and to give them a sense of accomplishment and ownership in their own learning (Crosby, 1997). I agree with Yang's comment on the role of a language teacher in the students' language

learning process. Unfortunately, it is not an easy task to achieve this goal when teachers are not fully supported by their administrators. Administrators have to understand the advantages of using the portfolio and work with teachers hand in hand to implement the portfolio into the classroom. According to Routman (1991), when teachers feel that using the portfolio in their classrooms will add too much to their workload, they will reject the idea of using it, or they will wind up collecting all the work from students without actually using it meaningfully (as cited in Newman, Smolen, & Lee, 1995). Because teachers are frustrated with extra responsibilities, this can impact the effectiveness of the portfolio. As a consequence, teachers will not make any essential changes or put in too much effort to the implementation of the portfolio, and they will not show their students the critical techniques to become autonomous and responsible for their own learning as well (Newman, Smolen, & Lee). The administrations can assist teachers by providing rewards for their time and efforts in using portfolio assessment.

### **Contents and Procedures of the Portfolio**

For the contents of the portfolio, there is not necessarily a set of fixed components to be included. The decision on the components of the portfolio can be made by the teachers, the students, or through an agreement between teachers and students. As a general guidelines, Crockett (1998, as cited in Nunes, 2004) suggested five different groups of materials that may be included in the portfolio of students: a) samples that are considered class assignment requirements; b) "processed samples" that were "previously graded by the teacher"; c) "revisions of student work" that are "graded and then revised, edited, and rewritten"; d) reflections that are associated with the "processed samples," and these reflections give students opportunities to identify their own strengths and weaknesses; e) "portfolio projects" that include work mainly designed for students to put into their portfolios (p. 1). As a

matter of fact, the portfolios could also include materials that have special meaning for the students in the process of learning, such as newspaper articles, pictures, and articles or pictures from magazines (Nunes). No matter what is in the portfolio, teachers have to communicate the contents of the portfolio clearly to students in the beginning of the course to avoid confusion and frustration. At the same time, teachers have to be sensitive to students' adjustments to the idea of the portfolio. Nunes' (2004) study suggested that the first samples collected from the students showed that they did not understand the objectives of doing reflections, and this might be because these students were not "used to thinking about their learning" (p. 2). Therefore, teachers need to introduce the use of portfolios and the materials to be put in the portfolio step by step and should expect some confusion from students at the very beginning.

After setting the contents of the portfolio, a schedule should be arranged to implement its use in the curriculum. Newman, Smolen, & Lee (1995) suggested the steps we can use to implement an effective and efficient portfolio management system in the classroom. Their research results showed that the system has been successful in helping ESL students become actively involved in planning, assessing, and reflecting upon their own learning. Therefore, I would like to use this particular approach to show the ways we can implement portfolios into an ESL classroom. The following procedures are described in detail in Newman, Smolen, and Lee (1995). First, every student had a working portfolio, and four different kinds of information were included in this working portfolio: "teacher collected material, student collected material, student management tools, and goal cards" (p. 12). In order to allow students to retrieve the information in the working portfolio easily, it was kept in a file box. For the "teacher collected material" folder, formal and informal assessments were included, and they were collected several times by the teacher during the year (p. 13). In addition,

the materials in the teacher folder can include "report cards, progress reports, cloze tests, student interviews, story retelling information, reading attitude inventories, and writing surveys," (i.e., "any material that might be useful") to communicate with the students' parents (p. 13). The "student collected material" folder had all the completed work from the students throughout the year (p. 13). Students were asked to date their ESL work in the folder every day. Student's work in this folder might contain "spelling tests, handouts, writing drafts, published writing, homework, and some writing pieces that were completed outside of the class" (p. 13). However, the "students' Writing Notebooks, Reading Logs, and Dialogue Journals" were not filed in this folder because they were used on a daily basis (p. 13). The "student management tools" folder had all the management tools to help students organize their work (p. 13). Students placed their "Friday Progress Reports, Time Management Sheets, and Learning Log entries" in it (p. 13). The weekly Goal Cards were the last thing students had to put in the "working portfolio" weekly (p. 13). These Goal Cards were handed back to students, and they put them in their working portfolio. After this, another portfolio was developed, called a "showcase" portfolio (p. 14). Any materials which students regarded as demonstrations of their personal growth and academic achievement were put in a three-ring notebook on a weekly basis. Indeed, this showcase portfolio was considered a crucial feature of students' learning. This showcase portfolio recognized, assessed, and revealed students' learning progress. It also helped students to build more "realistic goals" and retain a rationale for their own learning (p. 14). Students had to explain why they selected what they selected for their showcase portfolio. In addition, students would receive peer feedback on the materials they chose for their showcase, and the teacher also selected materials they considered good examples of students' work. Thus, this procedure of implementing portfolio

assessment places a high demand of time and energy from both students and teachers.

### **Evaluating Portfolio Assessment**

According to Yang (2003), there are seven differences between traditional and portfolio assessment. First, traditional assessment can only assess students in certain skill areas while portfolio assessment assesses students in a broader range of skill areas. Second, traditional assessment is more teacher-centered compared to portfolio assessment. Third, traditional assessment does not take individual differences into consideration like portfolio assessment does. Fourth, the teacher is mostly the only person to do the evaluation in traditional assessment while the portfolio includes students, teachers, and peers in the process of evaluation. Fifth, traditional assessment does not consist of self-evaluation while self-evaluation is one of the main learning aims in portfolio assessment. Sixth, traditional assessment focuses on the products alone while portfolio assessment focuses on students' "improvement, effort, and achievement" (p. 295). The last but not least advantage is that the areas of "learning, assessment, and instruction" are treated separately in traditional assessment while the connection of "learning, assessment, and instruction" in portfolio assessment is significant (p. 295).

Portfolio assessment has several important strengths. In writing assessment, portfolio assessment was found to be more suitable than the timed writing assessment (Song & August, 2002). According to Johns (1991) and Thompson (1990), it was more difficult to assess ESL students' writing abilities than native speakers' in timed writing assessment (as cited in Song & August). Song and August suggested that one of the main reasons for this was the limited amount of time: Having a set time during a writing test, non-native speakers could not focus on the skills needed for writing in a second language and on culturally related issues in the process of writing at the same time. As a result, using portfolio assessment can measure ESL

students' writing ability in a wider spectrum (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, as cited in Song & August). Another strength of portfolio assessment is the power to adjust the criteria of the assessment based on individual differences (Crosby, 1997). Though students have the same goals and objectives in the language classroom, their levels of performance can be varied, and teachers will be able to see these differences thanks to the use of portfolio assessment (Crosby). Also according to Crosby, the third main strength is the emphasis of strengths rather than weaknesses in portfolio assessment. This concept is very important in the learning process because students may feel discouraged and not motivated if the emphasis of the assessment is focused on their weaknesses only. Overall, using portfolio assessment provides students opportunities to "value their work," increase their "learning and autonomy," "reflect on their performance," "take responsibility for their learning" and learn how to "think holistically" (Yang, 2003, p. 295).

While there are numerous strengths in portfolio assessment, there are weaknesses as well. First of all, assessing writing by using portfolio assessment demands a lot of work and time from instructors (Song & August, 2002). A look at the portfolio procedure illustrates the demands of this assessment tool. However, teachers' cumulative experiences of using the portfolio and the knowledge of traditional assessment can help with the implementation of portfolio assessment into traditional assessment. More importantly, the reliability of the portfolio assessment is greatly debatable: Without a quantitative measure, it is difficult for teachers to score students' work consistently because students' work is not graded based on right or wrong answers, and there is an increase of subjectivity (Song & August, 2002). On the other hand, students' work is graded quantitatively in the traditional assessment, in which "the standards are determined by cut-off scores" (Crosby, 1997, p. 2).

### **Electronic portfolio (e-portfolio)**

More recently, there has been increased attention paid to e-portfolios as a more economical and dynamic alternative to paper portfolios. What is the difference between the traditional and the e-portfolio? The principle of the e-portfolio is similar to the traditional portfolio. The main difference is the way students' work is collected and compiled. When the e-portfolio is employed, students' work is collected and made accessible on the World Wide Web or simply a CD-ROM, and multimedia can be used, such as the "hypermedia programs, databases, spreadsheets, and word-processing software, as well as CD-ROMs and the Web" (Kahtani, 1999, p. 262). Furthermore, information in the e-portfolio can be presented in "graphics, videos, sounds, images, text, or any other multimedia format" (Kahtani, p. 262).

Kahtani (1999, pp. 263-265) goes into detail to describe how e-portfolios can be implemented in a writing class. Besides saving students' writing assignments in an electronic format and placing them on the Web, students can be asked to explore the use of hypertext to reinforce the contents of their writing assignments. Another part of the e-portfolio content is the "peer response forms" where students respond to their peers' writing directly (p. 264). This response form can be prompted by questions, such as those suggested by Kahtani (p. 264) "What is the strongest part of this writing?" (p. 264) "What are your suggestions for revision?" (p. 264) "What questions do you have for the author?" (p. 264). The third possible part of the e-portfolio consists of "teachers' comments and feedback" (p. 264). Reading journals are also included in the e-portfolio, where students place their weekly written journals based on the readings they perform for the week. Students can also insert a hypertext link to the materials they have read. Any other materials can be placed under the "miscellaneous" part, which is mostly information related to students' learning (p. 265). For each entry, students need to write a short paragraph explaining why they

chose the information they put in this miscellaneous session. I find this approach to be effective to develop students' creativity.

In contrast to the contents of a writing class, video technology can be used in a conversation class, as described in detail by Master (1998, pp. 132-133). The main contents of the e-portfolio in this class include an "oral dialogue journal, tapes of a class discussion," a taped outside-of-class interview, and tapes of a "formal presentation" that were presented in class (p. 132). The "oral dialogue journal" plays a crucial part in the e-portfolio for this conversation class because it helps students overcome the concerns that they do not have anything to say in a conversation or they cannot be understood by people who listen to them (p. 132). To do the oral dialogue journaling, students choose a topic of their interest and talk about it in front of the video camera. After that, the teacher responds to the students on the tape while listening to students' talk. By doing so, the teacher can lower students' anxiety level when they have to speak in English or listen to an English speaker in the real world. I think that video technology can provide students the opportunity to self-monitor their own learning and progress.

The major advantage of using e-portfolio is its economical aspect. Kahtani (1999, pp. 262-263) provides perhaps the most comprehensive list of e-portfolio advantages, which includes the following. First, the traditional portfolio takes a lot of paper and space while the e-portfolio avoids both of these problems. Another advantage is the possibility of helping teachers with their lesson planning. When teachers do their planning for the academic year, they can download students' portfolios on the Web. This can help teachers get to know the students earlier and plan their lessons according to the background and proficiency levels of students. Motivation plays an important role in the advantages that have just been mentioned. Placing students' work on the Web can definitely motivate students to learn. As Frizler (1995) suggested, students wrote better

when they realized that there was a broader audience (as cited in Kahtani). After all, students can have access to the portfolio whenever they want. They can upgrade or update the information without having to redo the whole portfolio. In my view, the e-portfolio will eventually replace the traditional paper portfolio.

However, Kahtani (1999) also pointed out several drawbacks of e-portfolios. An important drawback is the limitation to students who are illiterate in technology. Students also need to have the right equipment and software in order to work on the e-portfolio. Moreover, students may spend a lot of time focusing on the design rather than on the content of the portfolio. I believe that these limitations can be overcome by clarifying the purpose of doing the portfolio to students and providing extra instructions to students who are not familiar with technology.

### Conclusion

All in all, with the information on the basic concepts as well as the strengths and weaknesses of portfolio assessment, I consider the integration of this form of assessment in an ESL classroom to be more appropriate than trying to replace existing forms of assessment completely. As a

language teacher, it is important to know the elements of both traditional and alternative assessment. We need to have options on what kind of assessment tool we would like to use based on the needs of our students. We cannot dismiss the significance of the traditional assessment. In fact, portfolio assessment can enhance traditional assessment. For instance, the assessment of a non-native speaker's writing ability with merely one piece of writing can be supplemented by the numerous drafts and other related writing assignments that are collected in the student's portfolio.

Before we have further research results showing the reliability and validity of portfolio assessment, we need to be aware of its strengths and weaknesses. The most important consideration is to involve students in their learning and to help them to learn through assessment. There will always be strengths and weaknesses of all kinds of assessments, and a perfect model does not exist. Nonetheless, if teachers work with their own experiences and review the existing literature on portfolio research, they may be able to design a better assessment tool, even when it may be a mixed form of assessment.

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